

On the Politics of the Sikh Diaspora¹

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*Coolie, a coolie, they call us, what a shame!
How we are insulted in foreign lands
Why don't we control our own country?*

—Gadar Party Slogan

The Nation's Tortured Body: Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora." Brian Keith Axel. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.

Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World. Tony Ballantyne. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Brian Axel and Tony Ballantyne lend articulate voices to concerns over identity within the Sikh diaspora in the politically opaque milieu of multicultural Britain and post-9/11 America. As the Sikh diaspora continues to beat a retreat into the realm of identity politics, both authors highlight the effects of performatively enunciated cultural claims while richly portraying multiple “webs,” or Sikh lifeworlds. Together, their emphasis on the affective or subjectivist aspects of the diaspora represents a break in Sikh studies, simultaneously problematizing the effects of empire in Punjab and the relationship of the diaspora to the “homeland” while also incorporating themes found in “new imperial history” and postcolonial theory: a distrust of abstract/universal categories and a concomitant emphasis on the effects of representations and the impossibility of grasping cultural “difference.” However, a correlate of Axel’s own specifically Marxian categorical framework (i.e., the commodity and the fetish) is that the particularity of the Sikh diaspora can be overstated. And whereas Ballantyne deploys an altogether different optic, that of an

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“imperial social formation” that cuts across disparate historical epochs to examine the reconfiguration of Sikh identity, this kind of discourse analysis is no more efficacious than Axel’s approach at grasping the sociohistorical structures that allow for the articulation of cultural claims. That is, while both Axel and Ballantyne examine the tangled histories of colonialism, nationalism, and violence out of which the Sikh diaspora emerges, their work follows a wider historiographical trend in which different historical contexts seem to “inflect or orient, rather than more fundamentally constitute, the conceptual terrain of discourse” (Sartori 625). Over the course of this review essay, I argue that Axel and Ballantyne anachronistically project the current identity concerns of the Sikh diaspora, embodied in the ambivalent figure of Maharajah Duleep Singh, backward onto the history of colonialism in Punjab, as well as onto the subsequent rise of Indian nationalism, to ill effect. If one follows the three nodal points in their accounts—(1) the colonial entanglements of Maharajah Duleep Singh, (2) the Khalistanis’ (Sikh separatists’) claims to nationhood, and (3) diasporic politics in multicultural Britain—one can, I suggest, reconstruct a rather different history. Although it is beyond the remit of this review to do more than hint in its direction, one advantage of grounding the culturalist discourses to which Axel and Ballantyne so compellingly call our attention in their own determinate historical contexts is that it does not leave them suspended in the ether of Sikh “culture” but, rather, seeks to grasp that culture, as well as its central concerns, in an analytic framework that can start to address the apparent “particularity” of the Sikh case as itself modular; the assertion of particularity is a common diasporic trope found across sociocultural contexts. The more rigorous mode of inquiry that I am proposing also does not treat the present-day identity politics of the Sikh diaspora as inevitable.

Axel wrestles with a fundamental query in *The Nation’s Tortured Body*: What constitutes a diaspora? Axel contends that transnational Sikh communities confound some common notions about diasporas, the most important of which is the “place of origin” thesis, which argues that the “place of origin or homeland—embodied in formations of language, religion, tradition, race, ethnicity, indications of territoriality, etc.—constitutes the diaspora” (8). Because Indian tradition is often cast in Hindu overtones, but also because of the creation, “since the 1980s, of a transnational Sikh identity politics and particularly a diasporic fight for Khalistan,” the Sikh case is an awkward fit in diaspora studies (9). Axel’s own aim is to demonstrate, through a curious inversion, that it is the diaspora that discursively constructs the idea of a homeland (24, 230). Furthermore, on a related note, Axel expresses the deeply rooted suspicion in cultural anthropology of strictly objectivist analyses,

which, in privileging abstract/universal categories over contingency, insist that all diasporas reproduce mimetically (i.e., in exactly the same manner). He then identifies four different sites of Sikh “subjectification,” or subject constitution: (1) the “colonial” Sikh subject; (2) the “questioning” Sikh subject “constituted by the nation-state”; (3) the “Khalistani Sikh subject” who threatens to undo the entire juridico-political facade of the Indian state; and (4) the “Sikh subject constituted by Sikh studies” (35). Axel certainly moves beyond linguistic or psychoanalytic notions of the subject by putting an emphasis on the importance of “disciplinary practices”; but on a closer look we find that his analysis hinges on the discursive ambivalences in performatively enacted categories of subject identity. “Practice” in Axel’s analysis, then, means the ways in which historical actors fit into representational orders that are never themselves called into question; to put it differently, Axel fails to address the constitution of historically specific forms of social relations undergirding these subject positions.

Ballantyne meanwhile sets out to produce an “alternative vision of Sikh history” that ties together disparate “webs of empire” spanning three centuries in “a common analytic field” (24). In a sense, this project builds on an earlier work, *Orientalism and Race*, in which Ballantyne self-consciously identifies with the project of “new imperial history,” a project that stakes its claim to newness, as Andrew Sartori perceptively notes, on presenting “a sharper focus on the specifically cultural dimensions of empire, on conjunctural contingency and performative ambivalence, and on the mutually constitutive effects of the connections linking metropole and colony” (636). On a descriptive level, Ballantyne, like others in the cohort of new imperial historians, seeks to show that the imperial venture overseas was foundational in the constitution of cultural identities and material culture in Britain itself. Through close readings of colonial administrative as well as missionary discourses, Ballantyne demonstrates that racial attitudes hardened in the late nineteenth century, portraying a sharp racial divide between colonizer and colonized in contrast to the more cosmopolitan approach held up by eighteenth-century Orientalist scholars, “which had insisted on a common cultural genealogy shared by Indians and Europeans” (Ballantyne, *Orientalism* 188). On an abstract level, the dual aims set in *Orientalism and Race* extend forward to *Between Colonialism and Diaspora*: one is to de-center the notion that Britain was “the nexus of empire from where capital, power, and ideas flowed out to the colonies in the periphery”; the other is to argue that the categories “race” and “religion” found a new conceptual salience in the colonial context (*Between* 83). Yet one consequence of Ballantyne’s narrower textualist focus in this work, as opposed to *Orientalism and Race*, is that it effaces the periodicity of the illiberal

shift in racial attitudes across the empire in the late nineteenth century. Thus, while Ballantyne starts, appealingly, by gesturing to the social structures (i.e., “the institutions, markets, communication systems, and cultural networks that made up the empire”) in an effort to move beyond a simplistic metropole–periphery binary, the analysis ultimately falls short of its own stated objective to examine the historical constitution of Sikh identities in both colonial and diasporic contexts (30). His initially dynamic conception of the “extensive transformations that were enacted by the colonial state” (x), which either touched or reconfigured all pre-existing social relationships in Punjab, is left inchoate, as we shall now see.

Colonial Entanglements: Maharajah Duleep Singh

After the confederate Sikh armies forfeited the remnants of the Khalsa Raj (Sikh Empire) to the East India Company (EIC) state in 1849, Maharajah Duleep Singh of Lahore, son of Maharajah Ranjit Singh, the *sher-e-punjab* (“Lion of the Punjab”), was led into exile, first in the United Provinces in eastern India and then, later, in England.² For the EIC, which had obtruded into Punjab in fits and starts since the early 1800s to shield the chiefs of smaller fiefdoms who were threatened by Ranjit Singh, the abortive revolutions of 1848 in continental Europe left no serious rivals, other than the Sikhs themselves, to British domination in north India. The independent territories west of the river Sutlej, including the Kingdom of Lahore, itself in disarray after the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839, fell to the EIC at the close of the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848–49). Punjab was now the literal jewel in the crown, as the annexation of Lahore had transferred with it a claim to the Koh-i-noor (“Mountain of Light”) diamond, which Lord Dalhousie, who orchestrated the spectacular surrender of the Sikh *sardars* (gentry) at Ferozepur in 1849, remarked was a “historical emblem of conquest in [of ?] India” (qtd. in Axel, *Nation’s* 51).

The fate that awaited Maharajah Duleep Singh personally, Axel notes, reads like an ironic tale full of colonial intrigue. As news filtered back to London that Lord Lawrence had marshaled Sikh regiments loyal to the British in order to suppress the Sepoy Mutiny (1857)—a watershed moment in the historical narrative that Ballantyne reconstructs—the Maharajah, now of age, was eager to settle accounts with the EIC under the conditions set by the Treaty of Lahore. There was still the prickly issue of compensation for the private property seized (somewhat dubiously) upon annexation. Ballantyne adds that while the EIC directors on Leadenhall Street temporized, Duleep Singh, who, since departing from Punjab, had converted to Anglicanism, settled into a bucolic life at Elveden Hall

in Thetford, Norfolk. For a while, the Maharajah, who lived prodigally at the manor, even toyed with a run to unseat the local Liberal MP so as to be able to make a case for himself in Parliament. Late in 1869, Duleep Singh hosted a cousin, Thakur Singh Sandhawalia, who spoke of a prophecy in which the Maharajah was due to return to Punjab as the eleventh Guru of the Sikhs. After attempting in vain to win a favorable financial settlement from the India Office, in spite of direct appeals to the now Empress Victoria (India was transferred to the Crown in 1858), the frustrated Maharajah was left to contend with a spiraling debt to London bankers, which, in due course, led to a spell of narcissistic self-destruction. From the 1880s, Duleep Singh lambasted the illiberalism of the British in letters to the *Times of London*, styled himself the messianic eleventh Sikh “Gooroo,” fell into the company of Irish nationalists, and conspired with Tsar Alexander III to invade India. Eventually the ex-monarch was found lifeless in a squalid hotel room in Paris (Ballantyne, *Between* 94–6, 106–8; see Alexander and Anand 2001). Yet this section is about more than the life of Duleep Singh; its main concern is the powerfully constructed effects of representations, specifically those tied to the circulation of the Maharajah’s likeness. For Axel, as for Ballantyne, the circulation of these resemblances affords us a chance to rethink the nature of the British imperial formation in Punjab. If I had to adumbrate my own argument, it is this: Axel and Ballantyne fail to adequately grasp the historically determinate ideological character of colonial discourses. Of central importance in this section is Axel’s selective appropriation of Marx’s critical categories: the commodity and the commodity fetish.

On their first encounter at Buckingham Palace in 1854, Queen Victoria instinctively took to the boyish Maharajah, although she was bemused at the peculiarity of Duleep Singh’s “headdress,” which she thought hid an otherwise beautiful visage. So smitten were the royals with their “Oriental” caller that Victoria herself set about portraying the youngster in sketches, while Prince Albert trained the eye of a camera—still a rather recent invention—on the exotic muse; in addition, Victoria had Franz Winterhalter compose an enormous canvas portraying the Maharajah in exquisite regalia and charged the court lithographer, R.J. Lane, with publishing reproductions of the painting. “Likewise, she ordered the Italian sculptor Marochetti to do a bust, ‘which she had tinted by Millais just as Gibson in Rome had done to his Venus’” (Axel, *Nation’s* 50). Later on, as the rumors leaked into Punjab that the Maharajah was planning a return, local publishing workshops in India flooded the markets with portrayals of the Maharajah as an orthodox Sikh, while German companies were pouring in inexpensive, mechanically reproduced images depicting the Sikh Gurus, modeled on

Winterhalter's painting of the Maharajah. As intrinsically atemporal, the images of Maharajah Duleep Singh lend themselves to revisionism or reappropriation in the present day, so that one can in fact speak of multiple Duleep Singhs. There is the Duleep Singh who, as a loyal subject of the British Raj, was the first Sikh settler in Britain, or Anglo-Sikh. Less common nowadays is the portrayal of the craven Maharajah who abandoned Sikhism and Punjab. And then there is the politically consequential sovereign in exile, idealized by Sikh chauvinists (as we shall see in the section on Khalistan), who fought to recover the patrimony that the British had seized.

Axel reasons that "surrender" is the central trope in the tangled tale of Duleep Singh. He takes us back to the *mise en scène* at Buckingham Palace as the Maharajah was posing for Winterhalter when one afternoon, at Queen Victoria's behest, Lady Login inquired whether the Maharajah would like to see the Koh-i-noor in its new shape. Axel narrates in dramatic detail the manner in which, after playing with the light in its facets at a window, the Maharajah, with the deferential reverence of a loyal subject, handed the Koh-i-noor over to the Queen. But unlike the scene of surrender that Dalhousie had orchestrated on the battlefield at Ferozapore in 1849, what distinguishes this scene, Axel remarks, is that it took place between sovereigns, "producing a different effect of subjectification, regulation, and constraint" (52). Axel makes the case that these scenes of surrender attest to the effects of colonial representations at the high watermark of the Victorian empire. However, unlike Ballantyne, he makes no serious attempt to historicize these effects, which can otherwise be seen as a retreat from liberalism. Still, Axel is right, at least descriptively, that in performing this act of surrender the Maharajah affirmed "as both originary and nonnegotiable" the surrender at Ferozapore that had transformed the humiliated Sikhs into "new liberated colonial subjects" (52, 41). Axel then creatively reads the Winterhalter composition as a "text of surrender" that reflects, in its positioning of the Maharajah's body, the new relation forged between the Sikh nation and the colonial state:

All the expressive weight of the composition [is] on the body itself, which stands out suspended in motion, tall, and highly ornamented—a male body that, now arrested ambiguously in the space of a colonial frontier, has arrived at the westernmost limit of nineteenth-century Punjab and found, not Afghanistan, but London (Buckingham Palace). (54)

Positioned on this non-descript frontier, he continues, "the Maharajah's glorious body redoubles the [act of] surrender" that was enacted first in absentia on the battlefield and then, later, when Duleep Singh personally handed the Koh-i-noor over to Victoria (54).

Given this evocative back story, then, it was no surprise that when the National Portrait Gallery in London held a major retrospective exhibition in 1990 titled “The Raj: India and the British, 1600–1947,” the Winterhalter painting was chosen as its frontispiece, or that the likeness was again at the forefront when, in 1993, British Sikhs held a festival to commemorate the centenary of the Maharajah’s death.

How Maharajah Duleep Singh, who had considered himself a devout Christian when the Winterhalter portrait was made, came to be seen as a proxy for all Sikhs, Axel asserts, involves the interplay of different fetishes (of both the six-inch-stiletto and the Marxian type). Queen Victoria, as noted earlier, had found it strange that the Maharajah still wore a turban on court visits; his minder, Lady Login, too, had remarked on this strange ritual. Lord Dalhousie, meanwhile, saw in the turban a political necessity. Axel quotes Dalhousie to this effect: “The night-cappy appearance of his turban is his *strongest national feature*. Do away with that and he has no longer any *outward and visible sign of a Sikh* about him” (55; original emphasis). But in pronouncing the turban to be the Maharajah’s “strongest national feature” as a Sikh, Dalhousie stood with one foot on rather shaky historical terrain, as a turban had signified social status rather than religious identity in the Mughal courts, while the other foot was properly rooted in the knowledge of a custom whereby vanquished noblemen or monarchs had to remove their turbans, placing them at the feet of their conqueror as a sign of complete surrender. Ballantyne, as an aside, quibbles that Axel overlooks the prevailing tradition in Sikhism which held that Guru Gobind Singh had ordained men to wear a turban as an unofficial marker of Sikh identity, although Ballantyne himself does not dispute that colonial discourse transformed the symbolic significance of the turban into a fetish.³ Here Axel follows Homi Bhabha, who writes that in the colonial context, the

fetish is always a “play” or vacillation between the archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity ... and the anxiety associated with lack and difference ... For the scene of fetishism is also the scene of the reactivation of and repetition of primal fantasy—the subject’s desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division. (qtd. in Axel, *Nation’s* 30)

The fetish of the martial Sikh male with a turban, Axel and Ballantyne concur, led to a stereotype that was to be “anxiously repeated.”

This powerfully constructed fetish/stereotype, which the Sikhs themselves reaffirmed, intersects with another fetish—what Marx termed the fetish of the commodity. Axel argues that the “fetishism [of the commodity] facilitates the transformation of individuals into

representations or representatives of a people” (32), which means that the Indo-Germanic reproductions portraying the Maharajah that were sold as commodities somehow had a hand in this substitution that morphed the Maharajah into a sign of the Sikh nation. I think the cryptic shorthand Axel uses to notate Marx warrants closer attention, especially since I will make the case that as the narrative tacks from colonialism to the diasporic context of multicultural Britain, Axel remains fixated on one aspect of the commodity fetish, in which the concrete particularity of the use-value dimension of the commodity is sublated by the abstract homogeneity of its exchange-value. A commodity, Marx explains in *Capital*, is double-sided. One dimension is its *use-value*, which is intrinsic to the object; in other words, this is the realm of the incommensurable, the concrete, of particularity. The commodity’s other dimension is its *exchange-value*, which constitutes the sphere of commensurability, the universal, equality, and the abstract. These dual dimensions are mediated by labor that is social and is the source of all value yet rarely appears as such, which is what enables value to take the fetish form of appearance as “thingly” or “suprasensible” (Axel 31–2; see Marx). As a first determination, then, abstraction is ambivalent; it makes the incommensurable commensurable as a way of preserving difference, and exchange-value allows objects of equal value (measured by the amount of labor time involved) to be exchanged or substituted for one another. Quoting Marx, Axel states, “in a certain sense, man is in the same situation as a commodity” (31). Marx uses a Biblical metaphor to extend the analogy: “Peter only relates to himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, in whom he recognizes his likeness. With this, however, Paul also becomes from head to toe, in his physical form as Paul, the form of appearance of the species for Peter” (qtd. in Axel 31). This is all well enough; I find Axel convincingly demonstrates that the circulation of commodities processually enables the Maharajah to stand in for all Sikhs, but the analysis fails to explain *why* these commodities took on this valence in colonial discourses. To answer this question meaningfully would require one to delve much further into the historical context than an analysis of specific commodities allows—it necessitates a wholesale shift to examine the co-constitution of ideological claims within the dynamics of capitalist social relations in colonial-era Punjab. However, Axel seems content to simply aver that the universalism inherent in the “liberal project of enlightenment,” which was set in motion when the Sikhs bowed to the EIC state, was an act of sly civility: hitched to the pedagogical or civilizational mission was an illiberal aim, to mask colonial difference by producing a class of mimic men, “Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect” (41). That Axel treats Lord Macaulay’s infamous words as self-evident, without any historical

contextualization to explain the ideological impetus behind this statement, creates the indelible impression that the colonial representational matrix into which the Sikhs were slotted was formed behind the backs of the historical actors.

Ballantyne fares little better on this score. He strikes a promising note at the outset by proposing to examine the motivations behind imperialism in Punjab without “privileging the instrumentality of the colonial state” (26). He then urges us to look instead at the “points of recognition” between Britons and Sikhs: “Through these points of recognition, Sikh leaders could secure their cultural authority and win economic benefits (especially through recruitment into military service) from the colonial state” (26). Nonetheless, this rhetorical maneuver, it seems to me, only shifts the locus of instrumental reason from the state onto an individual actor, or onto collective groups. Colonialism, in this framework, operates on a friend-or-foe distinction: the apparent “commensurabilities between colonizer and a particular colonized community provided discourses and practices where colonial policy could gain purchase, creating new institutions and reshaping cultural patterns with the aim of shoring up imperial authority” (26). Two such nodes of commensurability stand out: (1) monotheistic religion and (2) an ethos of masculinity/martiality. Ballantyne demonstrates that these concerns emerge historically out of the fervent turf wars fought over “cultural boundaries” in late-nineteenth-century Punjab: “Colonial texts typically framed Sikhism as a simple masculine faith, defined by its martial sensibility and the visibility of the turbaned *kesdhari* [literally, “one who maintains unshorn hair”] male, within a religious landscape dominated by the supposed effeminacy of Hinduism and Islam’s despotic patriarchy” (41). Sikhs, as fellow monotheists, were allotted a special status in colonial ethnographies, Ballantyne claims, well before their role as defenders of the empire in the Sepoy Mutiny. The 1857 rebellion, in which native soldiers attacked their British officers, was an important event psychologically, since it reshaped Britons’ attitudes toward their colonial subjects even as Sikhs saw their own stock rise exponentially. Ballantyne eschews Axel’s ahistorical assertion that liberalism was inherently contradictory, arguing instead that the experience of 1857 thwarted the liberal project in Punjab. He tracks an upsurge in evangelical discourses emphasizing the racial and cultural differences between white missionaries and the natives; curiously, Duleep Singh took a renewed interest in Sikhism after perusing critiques of this illiberal shift. This sea change had a number of ramifications: whereas missionaries had once looked to Sikhism as the rationalized syncretism of Hinduisim and Islam, Sikhs elites, faced with a new illiberalism, now felt compelled to adopt the cloak of enlightened moderns in order to maintain their access to colonial privileges; their new

context also led them to undertake a mission to reform Sikhism while propping up the stereotype of Sikhs as a martial race. From the vantage point of this essay, then, it is still unclear whether Maharajah Duleep Singh, or Sikhs more generally, act with more than their self-interested instrumental reasons at heart. And what is more, performatively, the subject positionality of these actors appears to depend on their ability to take recourse to categories—race, class, religion, and gender—that are treated by Axel and Ballantyne as transhistorical, formed outside this historical calculus of interest. So one is left to wonder, Why does religion come to be a salient category in late-nineteenth-century Punjab, as it does the world-over in the same historical span? What made the racial stereotype of the effete Hindu versus the martial Sikh so effective? From whence does the Victorian Britons' own ethos of masculinity arise? And, going back a bit, How does one explain the specifically nationalist overtures of Maharajah Duleep Singh's discontent with illiberal British rule?

Khalistan Reconsidered

Throughout the 1980s, Sikh ultranationalists hoped to effect the creation of an independent "homeland"—Khalistan—in a violent clash with the Indian state. The brutal, extrajudicial manner in which the state dealt with the separatists, Axel contends, illuminates a constitutive ambivalence in the nation-form. On the one hand, the Khalistanis' demands indicated a crack in the symbolic bond that welds the nation into one; at a discursive level, such an "interruption" denoted, in Bhabha's words, the "impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force" (Axel, "National" 244; Bhabha qtd. in Goswami, "Rethinking" 774). On the other hand, in stark contrast to Ballantyne, who asserts that the continued emphasis on Khalistan in Sikh studies effaces the "politics of the everyday" (i.e., the more mundane but equally important cross-cultural dilemmas that confront diasporic Sikhs), Axel argues that the state violence targeted at the Khalistanis sets the "conditions of possibility" for a Sikh diaspora (Ballantyne, *Between* 22; Axel, *Nation's* 121). For Axel, the pornographically explicit images of tortured Khalistani *shahids* (martyrs) that circulate widely over the Internet act as a mirror that reflects the fragile unity of the Indian nation-state. Furthermore, the aestheticization of violence in this kind of macabre art depicting the mutilated bodies of Sikh men, often juxtaposing them to the gloriously framed body of Maharajah Duleep Singh (or to the Sikh Gurus), that can be found on Web sites, in allegorical comic books about Sikhism, and on the walls of Sikh temples, reformulates what it means to be a Sikh: it identifies orthodox Sikh men with the fight for Khalistan. Here Axel follows a well-worn trail in studies of

nationalism, first charted by Benedict Anderson, by emphasizing the discursive elaborations of nationhood. Yet Axel also seeks to critique what appears, in Anderson's analysis, as the opposition of "the objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye [to] their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists" (qtd. in Axel 113). His notion of a national "fantasy" seeks to move beyond the bind of whether an "imagined community" is real or fictive: "[it is] fictive, although no less 'real'" (112). But there are serious drawbacks to Axel's approach, which fails to adequately grasp the ideological dimensions of Khalistani discourses—specifically, the historically determinate character of their sociopolitical claims.

Axel calls attention to the symbolic importance that the conception of India as a bounded national space held once the nation-state was formed in 1947, especially since independence had involved the traumatic partitioning of Bengal and Punjab. His examination emphasizes the ways in which territorial metaphors figured into the national "fantasy" of *rashtriya ekta* (national integration/oneness). The nationalist enterprise, Axel is hardly the first to note, sought to transform individuals with their own caste, class, linguistic, or territorial affiliations into citizens. However, aporias were bound to surface in the interpellation of new citizen-subjects, Axel submits, even as nationalists like Jawaharlal Nehru heralded the subsumption of those "incommensurable differences" that were now seen as anachronisms predating the modern nation-state (116). Axel cites Vallabhai Patel, the architect of a national unification scheme, who, in the months after independence, rejected the demands made by the main Sikh party, the Akalis, for a majority Sikh state within India: "This is not the time to involve ourselves in needless disputes, nor can we ever afford to follow the mirage of many 'stans' like Khalistans and Sikhistans" (89). Axel also stresses the role of cartographic surveys in producing the boundaries that delimit the nation-state and in portraying the "*internal differentiation of India* (i.e. 'culture areas') in the most minute fashion." Maps, therefore, do more than represent the nation geographically or "visualize knowledge of India as a whole constituted by innumerable differences." Cartography "constitut[es] the anterior difference from which, in the fantasy of the people as one, the nation-state *must* emerge" (115). This "*must*" can be understood in different ways. It can be read, as the nationalists read it, in the sense of *ought*: if a new nation is to be forged, earlier differences ought to be overcome. If this is what Axel means, then the lack of social cohesion within the Indian nation-state might be explained contingently; in India, where there are perduring relations of sentiment, ran a typically nationalist refrain, specific caste, religious, or local allegiances were slow to dissipate. Axel, however, makes a much more emphatic claim about the "impossibility" of the nation-state: that it is riven with

contradictions that mark nationalism as discursively indeterminate. Axel implies, therefore, that the nation-state is structurally constrained; all nation-states seek to assert homogeneity within their own polities while positing difference from without.

But this only serves to underscore Axel's own inattentiveness to the wider context of the modern interstate system in which Indian nationalism is articulated, as well as of the socioeconomic relations that allow for the constitution—and, eventually, the naturalization—of an identity between the people and a geographically bounded space through a common national culture (see Goswami, "From Swadeshi"). And so, with the categories of analysis at hand, one is at a loss to explain why nationalism "must" sublimate those differences of affect and temporality, which, Axel suggests, the nation-state is itself responsible for generating. His discursive-analytic approach is symptomatic of other subjectivist approaches, which, as Manu Goswami notes in a brilliant analysis of nationalism as a modular form, are often inattentive to the manifold layers of social mediation that "shape the sociopolitical and discursive structure of nationalism" (Goswami, "Rethinking" 775). Thus, while Axel adds much to our sense of the internal tensions within Indian nationalism by pointing out the ambivalences inherent in the circulation of certain representations (e.g., maps), without sociohistorical grounding for these subjectivist categories, his analysis ultimately remains one-sided. Axel naturalizes the indeterminacy of Indian nationalism rather than questioning the historical necessity of the nation-state form as the logical outcome of decolonization.

Still, at a descriptive level, Axel is right. He astutely notes that Punjab is reified in the nationalist imagination as the granary of India and hallowed as the cradle of Sikhism; nevertheless, "as a sensitive border state," it falls into the "Restricted Zone" (under an arcane colonial-era statute, Axel finds, it is an imprisonable offense even to render an accurate map of the "Restricted Zone"). From this conjuncture, the narrative moves rather fluidly between different historical eras and from Indian nationalism to Khalistan. The inference to be drawn, then, is that Punjab occupies a liminal space. Its inhabitants, the Sikh separatists—buttressed by Sikhs in the diaspora—are potentially "questioning" citizen-subjects who constitute a threat within the nation-state akin to the threat from without (Axel, *Nation's* 111). This "threat," Axel specifies, is spatial—the Sikh militants were, after all, challenging the sovereignty of the nation-state—as well as temporal, insofar as the Khalistanis believed that the unitary time of the nation-state conflicted with a specifically Sikh notion of *kaal*, or temporality. Let us flesh out Axel's intriguingly framed assertion that the Khalistanis' claims to nationhood are founded on the misrecognition of a temporal dynamic.

The Indian nation-state, Axel contends, deploys a teleological notion of history; it seeks, in other words, “at one stroke” to render incommensurable differences commensurable by placing disparate actors into a spatiotemporal framework that is subordinate to the trajectory of the nation-state (113–4). Although Axel never adequately specifies the nature of capitalist social relations, the effects of such relations (through the circulation of commodities) are clearly understood to be what enables the nation-state to project a temporality that appears natural as well as transhistorical—so that historical differences, as Axel observes, now themselves appear to emerge out of the nation-state. This is precisely what Walter Benjamin refers to as “empty homogeneous time” (261). Axel, who takes a page out of Benjamin’s oeuvre, is well aware that capital, the cellular form of which is the commodity, is contradictory. This admits of the possibility that there can be temporal heterogeneity. Benjamin himself uses a theological trope, “messianic time,” to describe the (unfulfilled) potentiality contained within earlier political struggles that opens the possibility of their redemption in a discontinuous present: “Each second is the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter” (261; also see Goswami, “Rethinking” 782).

Based on an expressly Benjaminian model, Axel argues that the notion of *desh-kaal* (nation-time) in Khalistani discourses disrupts the nation-state’s own “progressive movement” (94). Axel explains that “*desh-kaal* is a category of Khalsa [an orthodox Sikh order] discourse about the *inseparability* of religion and politics.” He adds that the Khalsa initiation “inaugurates a new temporality, or *kaal*,” and that

in relation to *Akal* (Timeless) or *Akal Purakh* (Timeless Being)—expressions for God—this *kaal* designates not only the lived time of the *amritdhari* [Khalsa initiate], but also its new origin and, with it, the Sikh *panth*’s [community’s] destiny or fate [i.e., to establish itself as a *qaum* (nation)]. (94)

The Sikh *qaum/desh*, in the Khalistanis’ view, should identify with “its own” temporality, whereas the nation-state should “recognize the distinct authority and sovereignty of the Sikh *panth* that was now a *qaum*”—a possibility that the Indian state violently suppressed.⁴ For the Khalistanis, Axel demonstrates, the artistic representations of Maharajah Duleep Singh signify—in Benjamin’s words—“the creation of a demand which would be fully satisfied later” (qtd. in Axel 77). But, as Benjamin persuasively argues, there is a barb on the hook of this critical look at history: it is conceivable only in the context of modern capitalist society, or, more precisely, in a context forged by the abstract temporality tied to the value-form of capital. A correlate to this is that capital is itself charged with

emancipatory possibility. Even without recourse to such recondite theoretical issues, it should be clear that what is necessary is a closer look at the kinds of claims the Khalistanis made politically—a move Axel sidesteps entirely, emphasizing instead the discursive matrix in which state violence against Khalistanis is constitutive of the diaspora.

From another angle, I am proposing that it is precisely Axel's discursive–analytic approach, which privileges the circulation of specific commodities rather than capitalist social relations, that renders it inadequate to assess the historically determinate character of the Khalistanis' ideological claims. Furthermore, I would argue that while their call to establish a Sikh state was unexceptional (similar demands were first made in the 1930s), the Khalistanis' embrace of terrorist violence as a self-constitutive tactic was new.⁵ Axel does make the case that this kind of violence should be understood as politically motivated rather than as an irrational outburst, but he fails to develop an adequate critique of the sociopolitical worldview this violence implies; in this sense, he risks proffering an implicit apologia for the Khalistanis. His analysis misses, as an example, the ways in which the Khalistani worldview meshed with reified forms of patriarchy. Like Michel Foucault, who heralded the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran as the rejection of "Enlightenment" reason, which put it, in Foucault's eyes, beyond categorization, Axel sees the Khalistani movement as impervious to traditional right/left distinctions (see Afary and Anderson). Thus, instead of positing what should be seen as a dilemma faced by diasporic Sikhs between the repressive tactics of the Indian state and the profoundly reactionary, theocratic Khalistani movement, Axel is remarkably taciturn about the violence enacted by the Khalistanis, even proffering faint sympathies with their struggle for self-determination. His affinities with Foucault also lead him to intimate an approach to the historical specificity of subject constitution, or "subjectification" (33). Yet rather than following Foucault's own model, which stresses the historical imbrication of disciplinary practices and the formulation of discursive categories, Axel's analysis is limited by its emphasis on the subject positionality of Sikhs in relation to the nation-state. Khalistan, in this framework, appears as a kind of discursive effect, which, Axel concedes, exists only in the virtual ether of the Internet. A more adequate contextualization of the Khalistani movement would necessarily start with a re-examination of the "Green Revolution" in Punjab in the 1960 and 1970s. The complete overhaul of social relationships in the countryside that was unleashed by the Green Revolution led to a series of contradictory developments: on the one hand, its effects were spatiotemporally generalizing, since it involved importing American scientific know-how and machinery that would allow India to be agriculturally self-sufficient;

on the other hand, they were also particularizing, involving not only the intensive state-driven capitalization of Punjab but also a series of state-mandated blocks to the development of international trade and the influx of foreign capital. Of course, lest one think that all this smacks of economic reductionism, my aim is neither to find a chain of economic causation nor to contest that the Khalistanis had real discontents with the Indian state; rather, what I am suggesting is that Axel's narrative elides the deepening of subjectivity—that is, the creation of different kinds of social relationships and practice—through the uneven effects of this “revolution” that then allowed the Khalistanis and the Sikh diaspora to stake novel claims politically.

Sikhs in “Multicultural” Britain

How Sikhs fit into—or, rather, complicate—British debates on multiculturalism assumes a certain priority in these works.⁶ Behind this concern are still other vexations: Why did a sizable number of British Sikhs back the Khalistani movement? When did anti-racist Old Labour causes in the United Kingdom take a U-turn toward identity politics? How has multiculturalism contributed to the essentialization of cultural “difference”? Although it remains to be seen what “difference” means to either Axel or Ballantyne, as a preliminary observation one notes that the two share a broad consensus that Sikh men are the privileged signifiers of difference in Britain as well as on where to locate this problematic historically. This section starts, then, as Axel and Ballantyne do, with a brief historical overview of Sikh immigration to Britain after World War II, before jumping ahead to consider race relations in the United Kingdom since New Labour fashioned a national policy on multiculturalism in the 1990s.

After 1948, Axel recounts, Sikh men, like other Commonwealth subjects, flowed into Britain in order to fill the labor shortages then plaguing UK industrial centers. Political organization, modeled on trade unions, was of pressing concern to the new workers, who quickly formed satellites of the Hindustani Mazdoor Sabha, or Indian Workers' Organization. On the cultural front, the Punjabis in Southall, on the outskirts of London, where a majority had settled, built up associations such as the Indo-Pakistan Cultural Society as well as a new Sikh temple. Nevertheless, “a certain vicissitude characterized the relation of the nation-state to its new labor force” in the late 1950s; while British capital was putting “coloreds” to work, conservative Britons found their growing influx distressful (169). The anxieties over race came to a head in the late 1950s when a group of “blacks” (a blanket label that, at least until the 1980s, included South Asians) “pubbing” in Nottingham had a scuffle with whites at a “local” (the fastness of Englishness),

precipitating violent race riots in other metropolitan areas; in retrospect, Axel notes, the 1958 race riots “startled Britain into a new awareness of its postcoloniality” (170).

Against this backdrop, between the 1970s and the 1990s, Sikhs in Britain started to assert themselves as consumers with their own rights to leisure time. This newfound assertiveness, Axel perceptively observes, was itself linked to the logic of capital: workers are led to consume in an effort to sustain themselves, and, therefore, “leisure time, as such, embodies a compulsion of capital—‘enforced idleness’—in a temporal measure” (176). One outcome of their emergent role as consumers was the synthesis of a new musical aesthetic—“black bhangra”—which Ballantyne describes as a cross-cultural blend of Afro-Caribbean beats with Punjabi folk music. Although generically bhangra was only one of several Punjabi folk musical styles that were often tied to dances, it was never exclusively associated with Sikhs—until, that is, it was transformed in the diasporic context of Britain. For non-Sikhs, Ballantyne avers, bhangra is marked racially; the connotation with Sikhism is due partly to the ubiquity of “turbaned *kesdhari* Sikhs on album covers” (110, 158). Ballantyne characterizes the lyrics of black bhangra as expressions of the racial unease that young Sikhs, like other “blacks,” felt in Thatcherite Britain. As a result, this music was a self-conscious “act of positioning” South Asians in the wider sociopolitical milieu, growing as it had in the “interstices” of the dual “structures central in the formation of modernity: the ‘Black Atlantic’ and the ‘imperial social formation’ created by British colonialism in South Asia” (135). Ballantyne takes inspiration from Paul Gilroy’s work on hip-hop as an authentic expression of black angst in order to argue that the diasporic themes of alienation and anti-racism that made black bhangra “politically aware and aesthetically innovative” were also pointing to a new polyglot Britain. Hence, as a strategic assertion of cultural difference, black bhangra was also a bald rejection of the “assimilationist aims” older Punjabis had articulated; besides, racial violence in the late 1970s “undercut any residual aspirations to ‘whiteness’” that Punjabis might have held (134–6, 140).

Yet the death knell tolled for black bhangra in the 1990s. Just as South Asians came into their own as consumers with considerable reach, bhangra was refashioned into multicultural “world music,” but its packaging for mass consumption was increasingly apolitical and tawdry. In short, black bhangra was unable to resist commodification. Here we see Ballantyne make a cruder case that the exchange-value side of the commodity overshadows its use-value dimension, which throws us back into Axel’s ambit. Axel’s own claim is that there are “definitive qualities” that diasporic subject-citizens share with the attributes of the commodity, which means that by purchasing their own “locals” to drink in, or, if we take Ballantyne’s

example, by producing culturally specific music, Sikhs in Britain reproduce a fetish “wherein diasporic difference may be abstracted into national equivalence” (Axel, “National” 236).

Although British Sikhs reaffirm the shibboleths about multicultural diversity, the image of the Sikh male, bearded and turbaned, cuts a sharp figure that challenges the “heteronormativity of the nation-state” (Axel, “National” 247). In a passage worth quoting at some length, from a 2002 article, Axel writes,

The racialized image of the Sikh man with beard and turban interrupts the process of circulation that mediates the national movement of embodiment and abstraction. This interruption, indeed, demonstrates a form of relation between the nation-state’s social formation and the social formation of capital: particularly, a relation in which definitive qualities of the citizen seem to share the qualities of the commodity form. One way to think of this is in terms of how both categories of citizen and commodity are constituted through a specific bond or relation between heterogeneity and abstraction in which the former may become the embodiment of the latter only to the extent that it “participates” in the production of the abstraction. In the case of the citizen, this means remaining within the national circuit, singularizing one’s loyalties, or becoming the performative subjects through which national life is redeemed. In the case of the commodity, this means remaining within another circuit, that of capital production and consumption. (“National” 248)

Ballantyne seconds this observation in a vignette about Sikh visitors to Elveden—the estate that once belonged to Maharajah Duleep Singh—whom the locals found unwelcome:

The turbans worn by many of the men, the *salwar kameez* of the women, and the sound of spoken Punjabi called into question an unreconstructed white Protestant Englishness. The bodies, dress, and language of the visitors manifested cultural difference in ways that could not easily be absorbed into [a certain] vision of England. (*Between* 110)

Thus, in both accounts, multiculturalism seeks to blunt the “threat” of the Sikh male, whose appearance alone threatens violence.

If we take a step back, what we find is that both Axel and Ballantyne accept the “unassimilable” character of cultural difference, which always remains “interstitial” and “hybrid,” as well as potentially “transgressive.” Axel and Ballantyne thus build on 1980s debates in British cultural studies, between critics such as Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha, that articulated a disenchantment with Labour politics in Britain and its failure to deliver on the demands

of the 1960s, culminating in the election of Margaret Thatcher. This much seems clear: both Axel and Ballantyne distinguish the sort of cultural diversity valorized under multiculturalism from more elusive enunciations of cultural difference—as in the case of black bhangra. Bhabha makes a similar distinction when he argues that

cultural diversity is an epistemological object—culture as an object of empirical knowledge—whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as ‘knowledgeable,’ authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification. (34)

Someone like Hall, on the other hand, recognizes the intractability of racism in British society but remains committed to the project of political recognition as a step on the road to social emancipation. For Ballantyne, the decline of black bhangra from an authentic expression of “cultural difference” into an apolitical morass “reflected the broader crisis in the strategic alliances between Blacks and South Asians that energized British leftist and anti-racist movements” (*Between* 146). The window that these movements had levered open in their attempts to overcome racial politics, Ballantyne suggests, was shut by the 1990s; the context that led to the failure of these progressive social movements also hardened racial prejudices that, as the violent outbreaks in the 1970s and 1980s showed, had always lurked beneath the surface. But this formulation is sure to strike Axel as hypostatizing the categories of difference, since it shifts the emphasis from the discursive ambivalences inherent in subject identities. Axel, in this scenario, takes what appears to be the more radical stance of suggesting that there is an impossibility to recognition as a political project, that is, that it is inadequate to build a diasporic politics that is framed around socioeconomic issues or, simply, around calls for anti-acism and equal representation. At last we can see the “payoff” of the Marxian categories that Axel earlier introduced into his analysis. Axel espouses the view that “early on, Marx identified the individual as a phantasm of bourgeois society imbued with putative agency, intentionality, consciousness, and freedom” (*Nation's* 34). The political task, Axel states, is to “displace this phantasm of self-determination” (34).⁷ For both Axel and Ballantyne, the commodification of Sikh culture in the diasporic context threatens to mask its essential difference, represented physically in the figure of the orthodox (*amritdhari/kesdhari*) Sikh male. Faced with the breakdown of progressive agendas by the 1980s in the United Kingdom, their analyses turn to those moments in which the diaspora asserts its cultural difference, or to the aporias in the liberal humanist vision of freedom. Yet what this

move brackets out, in the final analysis, is the possibility of pointing beyond multiculturalism.

Conclusion

American Sikhs were blindsided by the xenophobic backlash after 9/11. Burdened with their appearance, orthodox Sikh men found it hard to shake off their mistaken identification with Al-Qaeda terrorists, and this kind of literal misrecognition sparked a debate on Sikh identity in the US diaspora similar to those already familiar to Sikhs in Canada and in Britain. Axel and Ballantyne illustrate that such debates are tied to a complex constellation of historical developments; more accurately, modern Sikh identity is intertwined—in their analyses—with the contradictions of colonial liberalism in the late nineteenth century, as well as more proximally to the failure of Indian nationalism, but also, significantly in the diasporic context, to the collapse of a traditional leftist political project by the 1980s. Their analyses eloquently underscore those moments in which the diaspora appears to assert its own agency (e.g., the reappropriation of historical figures such as Maharajah Duleep Singh or the creation of a new musical aesthetic). Yet neither Axel's analysis nor Ballantyne's obviates the need to scrutinize the socio-political aims of the Khalistani movement or the Sikh diaspora more generally.⁸ In the face of the commodification of Sikh culture, the one-sidedness of their concern with preserving cultural "difference" leads to a significant elision of the fact that capital mediates the dual dimensions of the commodity in such a way that it can sometimes appear that the abstract superintends the concrete—giving rise to myriad fetishes; this implies, of course, that capital itself imposes limits on and structures the transcendental properties of the "universal" as well as the form of the "concrete." Hence, ironically, it is precisely these constraints on subjectivity that are bracketed out by Axel and Ballantyne, who, in approaching the Sikh diaspora from the angle of culturalist discourse analysis, first powerfully raise such questions. That is, one can read Axel and Ballantyne without ever discovering why Sikhs who emigrated overseas in the first half of the twentieth century eschewed a specifically Sikh identity politics, or that there was a Green Revolution in Punjab that in the unevenness of its development set a series of contradictory movements into motion that also affected the diaspora, or that the Khalistani movement arose, at least partially, in an attempt to counter the influence of communists in Punjab (see Tatla; Ali). To put it simply, we are left to our own devices to imagine whether the Sikh diaspora's identity politics might ever look different. Of course, in order to adequately address the constitution of the Sikh diaspora in the future, we will need to square the multiple Sikh lifeworlds

that Axel and Ballantyne describe with their own insistence that the Sikh diaspora is one instance in a heteronomous web.

Notes

1. I would like to thank *Diaspora*'s editor, Khachig Tölölyan, Chris Cutrone, Atiya Khan, James Vaughn, and Spencer Leonard for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this review.

2. Spellings of the Maharajah's name vary from "Duleep," the name with which the Maharajah was christened, to "Dalip," which follows the conventions of standard Punjabi orthography. Axel and Ballantyne are themselves split on this issue. I use "Duleep," as that was the spelling the Maharajah himself used most often, but I write "Ranjit" rather than "Runjeet," in accordance with the modern convention.

3. Sikh tradition holds that in 1699 Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, anointed the sacred text, the Guru Granth Sahib, as the extant Guru but also instituted the Khalsa order. Sikhs who are initiated into this orthodox order are referred to as *amritdharis* (literally one who takes *amrit*—the eternal nectar). Their initiation requires them to maintain the "Five Ks"—*kes* (hair), *kacch* (breeches), *kanga* (comb), *kirpan* (dagger), and *kara* (steel bracelet). Strictly speaking, bearded and turbaned Sikh men may be uninitiated, in which case they are called *sehajdhari* (literally someone slow, i.e., a Sikh slow to adopt *amrit*) or, more generally still, *kesdhari* (literally, one who maintains his *kes*, or hair).

4. The Persian *qaum* and the Sanskrit *desh* are synonyms in Punjabi.

5. Axel is unable to explain *why* earlier waves of Sikhs overseas eschewed a narrowly Sikh identity politics in order to align themselves with radical elements of the Indian nationalist movement (such as the Gadar Party, established in San Francisco in the early 1900s).

6. Britain is seen as one instance of the Sikh diaspora rather than as exemplary.

7. Axel does suggest, in a later essay, that "translation" allows for the interpolation of Sikhs "into the domain of commensurability typical of the multicultural fantasy" ("National" 247), but dodges what this means in terms of political strategy.

8. It is inadequate simply to allude—as the charismatic Khalistani leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale did—to an emancipated future brotherhood of different religions. In a future emancipated society, the categories of "incommensurable" difference would surely hold a reconfigured valance.

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